

Grassroots Initiatives: Working From the Ground Up

Shawnee Wet/Dry Vote

Presented by: Marian Dunkerley

“Somebody ought to do something!”

Change does not happen in a vacuum. Something has to happen that causes a reaction, a thought, a plan...and eventually leads to a desired change. In other words, we don't just wake up one day and say, "I think I'll change the world today!" Something has to happen first.

By taking the following steps, you can effect change in the world. It has to start with a community. Change---real change---doesn't come overnight on a grand scale; it starts small.

1. Know your purpose: identify the challenge.

This might sound only too obvious, but clarifying your purpose is will do a number of things. It will help you determine who needs to be on board; it will also determine to whom this action should be targeted, and it will help you immensely in your communications. Develop a message.

2. Ask for help: get the right team together.

One hand clapping isn't very impressive. An organized group with passion for a cause is more effective than one voice. Who are the movers & shakers in your area who are known for getting things done? Are they on board with you, or are they on the other side of the issue? If you don't know many people, ask your councilperson, a trusted neighbor, a pastor, block watch captain, or other person who is in the know to help you get a core team together to have an initial meeting. Spell out your situation to them, and ask them for help.

3. Educate yourself: find out the FACTS.

Before you proceed, be SURE you are armed with the facts---the good, bad and ugly---so you can prepare your team accordingly. Educate yourself and your core team first so you can stay on message with your volunteers and your audience. Although emotions are crucial to spreading the word, it needs to be the right word. Critics will nail you every time on misinformation. Consistently stick to the facts.

4. Delegation: dealing with strengths, weaknesses and egos for winning strategies.

Even a stopped clock is right twice a day. By studying people during the beginning stages, you can begin to identify who's strong in some areas and who's better in others. Are you the analytical type, or an idea person? Detail oriented, or big picture? No matter. Everyone has a place; learn to maximize others' strengths as well as your own, and where you are not so strong, allow others to fill in and be gracious about it. There should be leaders, but no one person should dominate. You will need all the help you can get, and this is not the time or place for power struggles. Decide early who will do what in order to minimize conflict. Chances are if your issue is emotional anyway, someone with a cool head should definitely be on the lead crew.

5. Conduct effective meetings to rally the troops!

As you work on your plan, be sure to have consistent, orderly informational meetings so people will know what the cause is, why they are fighting for it, whom to talk to, who's going to do what, what obstacles need to be overcome, and how to implement the plan. There will be latecomers; have a way to get them caught up without bogging down the meetings in going over the same information over & over again. Have a purpose for the meetings; don't just meet to meet. Plan activities, break things up into groups, find resources, and report results of previous activities.

These meetings should be a give and take of information; all information doesn't necessarily have to get "pushed down". Using Roberts' Rules of Order is highly recommended, but if you're not familiar with parliamentary procedure, get some cliff notes on how to conduct effective meetings. Have an agenda, a starting and stopping time, and don't let people ramble. Have some structure or time limits for speaking. And don't let things get too hot...if they do, take a break. Abusive language or behavior should not be tolerated.

Attendees should feel engaged in the process, not ordered around. Some time should be built into the agenda to take input from the group---you can get great ideas, contacts or resources from your group. When you end your meetings, make sure some kind of action will take place before the next meeting, whether it's research, handing out flyers, etc., but make sure you're making progress or you'll lose your group.

6. Communication, communication, communication: go high tech and low tech.

Most information will be provided at meetings, but everyone isn't on the same schedule. Use e-mail and phone trees; have people prepared to distribute flyers door to door; borrow copying time from your councilperson or an engaged business person or church; use church bulletins; access local media when appropriate. And don't underestimate the power of the grapevine.

This part is not really a "step." It is critical to the entire process. Nothing can happen without communication. People need to know when meetings are, why they're being held, what will happen at the meeting, what happens after the meeting, and next steps. Be aware that if your meetings are open to the public, you may have "spies." There may be malcontents who won't play along or spoil plans. Be prepared to communicate only what is necessary to your true believers. Timing is everything when communicating.

7. Act! It takes more than meetings.

Once a plan is in place, there needs to be action, noise, or something that gets attention. Preferably all of the above. You need to get noticed in order to build momentum. Be prepared, however; once the rubber hits the road, you will also attract naysayers and opposition as well as supporters. This is part of the process and should not be taken personally. In fact, welcome it---it will help you strengthen your movement. As new people come on board, get them ramped up---feed on their energy!

8. Bending light to see around corners.

You should always be one step ahead of the competition. Think like they do. Use “what if” scenarios at meetings, but don’t get too complicated or too far ahead; it can confuse your group. Just be very aware that somebody out there will not like what you are doing and may try to sabotage your movement. If you are prepared for it, you won’t be discouraged! Stand your ground.

9. Celebrate every victory!

There will be small victories along the way, and sometimes setbacks. Use the setbacks as teachable moments, thank everyone as often as possible. Change doesn’t happen without a lot of pairs of hands, so be grateful for their attendance, passing out flyers, making phone calls, making posters, whatever it is they do. Those are the efforts that will create change, and as it starts to happen, be happy and congratulate them and yourself!

10. Be flexible: unexpected things may happen.

Sometimes you get thrown a curve; you have to roll with the punches. Sometimes your plan may fall flat and you have to drop back and punt. Someone may get disenchanted or have to leave because of an emergency. People are often enthusiastic but not as dependable as you might like. It can’t be said enough: proper planning will help alleviate most situations, but something may pop up that nobody anticipated. Take the opportunity to regroup, re-educate and keep going. You can still reach your destination by detour.

11. Keep the media engaged – you need them!

From time to time, your issue may seem to lose steam. Establish contacts with the media to keep the larger community aware that your effort has not shriveled up. Be honest with the media, but be aware their job is to report both sides of the media. In some cases, the media may contact you with new information that can be valuable to your cause.

12. It’s not over yet.

You may or may not be successful in your efforts. It’s up to you to decide whether to keep pursuing your cause, but be aware the end may not really be the end. Keep the heat up when you need it, and turn it down when you don’t, but don’t get caught off guard. Be vigilant!

When it really is over, you can celebrate the success! Some efforts are short-lived, others go on for years. Be proud of your efforts and if appropriate, turn the reins over to someone else, and move on to your next project!

Remember: YOU are somebody. YOU can do something. YOU can be part of the solution. BE SOMEBODY!